Public library digital participation programmes–
the impact on employability

Final Report on Work IT, Stirling Council
Libraries

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Introduction

This research set out to investigate the impact on employability of public library digital participation programmes. It did this through action research using current activity in Stirling.

Digital Inclusion Officer, Angela Short, was employed from September 2017 until November 2018 in a post jointly funded by a CILIP Information Literacy Group Research Bursary and a grant from the Scottish Government Digital Participation Unit. Her role was to increase digital participation throughout public libraries in Stirling with a particular emphasis on digital support for employability. Over the course of 10 months over 156 drop-in sessions were delivered with 229 attendees. Many of these participants attended only one or two times. A total of 32 people attending regularly completed a questionnaire assessing their digital skills and confidence the second week attending Work IT and again when they had attended several sessions.

Angela's work built on the success of the general IT & Me programme already established in Stirling. The name for this programme was chosen as we aim to build both digital and information literacy skills to enable job-seeking and income maximisation, identifying the hook that highlights the benefits of digital participation **to each individual**. Training with IT & Me covers how to make savings online, navigating fuel comparison sites, finding out what benefits people are due, exploring internet safety or discovering how to evaluate the glut of information available online. We had identified an increase in welfare reform/job-seeking related enquiries and sought this research funding to set up a separate digital support project called Work IT. The original IT & Me sessions continued, run by library staff and volunteers, but because Angela had little spare capacity to support these sessions, it was less of a focus during this period.

The main duty of the Digital Inclusion Officer was to plan, develop and deliver Work IT sessions aimed at increasing the digital skills of people who are unemployed or claiming Universal Credit. For the purpose of this report figures and analysis will focus primarily on Work IT and the effect these sessions had on participants, their confidence, digital skills and employability.

A secondary task was to develop and maintain a sustainable volunteer programme to enhance and develop digital skills of the general public through the IT & Me sessions.
The research did aim to address the benefits for volunteers of their involvement but due to the focus on Work IT, it was not possible to recruit many new volunteers at this time. There was a natural turnover which meant that continuity was limited. As the research progressed it became clear that people accessing digital support for employability often had particular needs and difficulties and have a right to expect their individual circumstances are kept private. Volunteers are not best placed to deal with these enquiries. However, our staffing resource in the Digital Services team has recently increased and we hope this will enable us to fulfil our ambitions regarding volunteer research. We plan to examine the benefits for volunteers of assisting with our basic digital support project, IT & Me.

IT & Me

IT & ME drop-in sessions in Stirling Council Libraries help people solve basic IT problems and learn new digital skills. The sessions are primarily led by volunteers who help all members of the public, regardless of age or ability, with a range of intermediary digital activities such as accessing the internet, shopping online, setting up email accounts and getting the most from their devices. The sessions are completely free and learners are encouraged to learn at their own pace in a relaxed atmosphere.

In September 2017, eight Stirling Council library branches were delivering IT & Me sessions. By December 2018, thirteen out of fifteen staffed branches ran sessions with the remaining two branches due to follow soon.

In December 2018 there were twelve fully trained volunteers, one awaiting Disclosure checks and two expressing an interest in taking part. Volunteer recruitment has proved difficult. We do ask a commitment of two hours per week at a set time and that volunteers inform a member of staff with as much notice as possible if they are unable to attend – this is quite a commitment to make. We have had a number of volunteers who are from IT backgrounds and wish to 'give something back' or university students looking for experience and this has worked well. We also have a number of volunteers who are retired and are keen to give their time to help others. In branches where there is no volunteer or if a volunteer is absent we ask that the Community Library Officer takes the session. Presently three branches have staff led sessions and ten are volunteer led.

The Digital Inclusion Officer was responsible for developing the skills surgeries and digital inclusion opportunities in libraries and led on the proactive recruitment, training and subsequent coordination of volunteers. This included the induction process, Disclosure Scotland checks, training and the on-going management and support of volunteers. Training materials and guides were developed to meet the demands of the public and volunteers using specialist software, including e-learning resources. The Digital Inclusion Officer ensured that front line customer care standards were met and maintained in relation to the sessions. The promotion of the sessions through branding and marketing was organised and any enquiries from the community relating to them were answered efficiently.

The general IT & Me sessions were fairly well attended, with 489 participants between the months of October 2017 and April 2018. In October and November 2018 alone, 62 IT & Me sessions took place with 90 attendees. These sessions offered basic IT support but it has become apparent that there is a demand for more

advanced help with issues such as purchasing and installing virus software, film editing and music streaming. Currently we do not have the capacity to accommodate classes or more in depth sessions but we have clearly set out in our publicity and our new charter what help we can offer. We do direct people to the Council's Learning and Employability team or Forth Valley College's Flexi Learning if they would like more advanced digital skills training. In future we hope to recruit more volunteers with an IT background, perhaps through partnership work with Stirling University or Forth Valley College. This might enable us to offer more in depth IT help and expertise. We have also developed an Assistant Volunteer opportunity aimed at senior High Schools students. We are working with Stirling Council Education and Stirlingshire Voluntary Enterprise to roll out this opportunity and arrange Saltire accreditation for the scheme. This should have benefits for the young people involved and for participants, and the intergenerational aspects will bring a fresh dimension to sharing IT skills.

As the Digital Inclusion Officer's main task and responsibility was to develop and deliver the Work IT sessions and associated research it often proved difficult to support volunteers fully and provide training opportunities during the period of this research. Attendance at the sessions has been sporadic until recently as we did not have sufficient staff resource to promote the project. We were also unwilling to create demand we could not meet so we did not advertise in the local press or on social media. We were concerned that sessions would not become too large for volunteers to handle with limited support in place.

There has been general recognition of the demand for digital support in Stirling libraries, and the help we are able to provide, Libraries were given funding by Stirling Council last year to develop this work, particularly with a view to mitigating the pressures created by Universal Credit. Two one-year posts were funded. The first of these allowed us to extend the work of the existing Digital Inclusion Officer, and the second was a Digital Volunteer Coordinator post. Both of these commenced in November 2018 and in Angela Short's case the new contract ran on directly from the research funded post, allowing us to continue evaluation of her work with jobseekers.

This further funding will greatly enhance both the IT & Me programme and the more specialist Work IT. Volunteers will benefit from further support and increased training opportunities will become available. A first step has been conducting a skills audit of staff and volunteers.

We plan to introduce a triage system where library staff trained in basic IT. skills can offer quick fix solutions to customers. The second level will be more in-depth workshops that focus on themes such as using social media, online shopping, iPad basics etc. It is hoped that these will be delivered by staff with the assistance of a volunteer therefore giving customers a more structured approach but also giving volunteers greater support and guidance. The third level would then be signposting customers on to further learning such as online resources, Forth Valley College Flexi Learning or Stirling Council's Learning and Employability team. It is hoped that this new approach will offer a clear route to appropriate help. Staff will have improved digital skills and will be able and more confident to deal with I.T. enquiries, volunteers will be properly guided, supported and trained through a structured programme and members of the public will have their digital enquiries answered

effectively and efficiently. The potential for more in-depth and specific digital knowledge will be offered and the potential for further formal learning will be addressed.

Work I.T.

Background

Universal Credit was fully implemented in Stirling Council in June 2017 for anyone of working age who is on a low income or is out of work. Prior to the full implementation there was a concern that libraries would be overwhelmed with Universal Credit related enquiries. Since the full implementation it has become apparent that people are increasingly attending their local libraries seeking job related IT assistance. Often the help needed is with issues such as making a Universal Credit claim, setting up a Universal Credit account or creating C.V.s. While these tasks may appear to be straightforward they are often time consuming and complex for people with little or no IT skills. Due to time constraints and other pressures it was apparent that providing such assistance was having an effect on other service users and staff.

In September 2017 with the appointment of a new Digital Inclusion Officer, Stirling Council Libraries created the Work IT programme. Using feedback provided from the branch Community Library Officers, areas where unemployment was prevalent and demand for help was high were identified as pilot areas. Work I.T. sessions initially took place in Bannockburn, Callander, Cowie, St Ninians and Plean libraries on an informal drop-in basis. The Digital Inclusion Officer developed, planned and delivered the sessions. The objective was to offer support and to enhance the digital skills and confidence of people looking for work. Attendees had free use of PCs, internet and Wi-Fi and it was hoped after attending the sessions they would be equipped with basic IT skills allowing them to manage their Universal Credit and other job seeking activities.

In June 2018 the Digital Inclusion Officer collaborated with Stirling's Citizens Advice Bureau's Rural Advice Access Project which aimed to give rural areas better access to advice services and IT support. It was hoped that CAB advisers would be able to give advice on benefits etc. and the Digital Inclusion Officer could help with IT support and online claims. The Digital Inclusion Officer liaised with CAB by offering additional sessions in Balfron, Fallin, Plean and Strathblane. Therefore by June 2018 there were eight Work IT sessions running across the Stirling Council area. Over the course of 10 months over 156 drop-in sessions were delivered with 229 attendees.

Initial Observations

It was clear that some people who attended the sessions had additional needs such as learning difficulties, substance abuse problems or mental and/or physical health issues. Many people had lived their lives with no formal diagnosis and often struggled to gain employment with little or no additional support. In such circumstances the Digital Inclusion Officer would signpost people to Stirling Council's Learning and Employability team. They offer a tailored programme for people facing particular barriers to employability.

We discovered that people were often daunted by the prospect of using a computer, perhaps for the first time, to deal with something as important as making a benefit claim. Many people attended sessions distressed and worried that that their payments would be stopped or they would incur sanctions if they were unable to access their Universal Credit account. Universal Credit claims must be completed online before claimants can receive payment, their commitments agreed with their work coaches must be accepted online, online job search journals must be completed to document work search and applications and CVs must be created and uploaded onto the Universal Credit account. Many people who attended the sessions had never been online so the task ahead was intimidating and very isolating. Some people needing to make a claim hoped that the Digital Inclusion Officer would be able to advise them of the content or benefits received. It had to be made clear to attendees that the Digital Inclusion Officer could help them get online and access the form but they must have the information needed to make a claim.

The sessions started off relatively quiet with numbers gradually increasing and reaching a peak in March, April and May. Bannockburn and St Ninians were well attended however Callander, Fallin, Plean, Balfron and Strathblane were very poorly attended with some weeks no attendees. Whilst many CLOs had commented that there were plenty of employment related enquiries people seemed very reluctant to attend the sessions. One explanation may be that in small communities people were reluctant to be seen receiving employment-related help. Over the summer months attendance at all sessions began to drop, perhaps due to the warm summer but also the introduction of Fair Start in April 2018. This saw many participants cease attending the Work IT sessions in favour of a tailored employment programme that included IT help and support. Fair Start covers Stirling Council, Falkirk and Clackmannan and has local authority backing. DWP, as official partners of the scheme, referred their clients to Fair Start. This had a significant impact on the Work IT project as 44% of our participants were referred from the DWP. Stirling Council is fortunate that such a project runs offering people support however, in areas where such an initiative does not exist libraries could well be the only place where people can get free internet and PC access as well as help and support with job searches and employment related digital help. As time has gone on, we have discovered there is still a need for digital support for employability in the wider community and we have adapted the help we offer accordingly.

During the busy months it was apparent that the drop-in basis of the sessions were proving difficult. The Digital Inclusion Officer was the sole leader of the session. In some instances five or six people attended within the one hour time slot all needing support, at times with issues such as making a new Universal Credit Claim or creating a CV which required dedicated time and focus. It proved difficult to give people the help and support they needed and the Digital Inclusion Officer often had

to prioritise who was most in need of urgent help. As mentioned in the introduction to this report, we did not recruit any dedicated Work IT volunteers due to the highly confidential nature of these sessions. In addition, it was felt that expecting volunteers to deal with people who were perhaps very distressed or under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs would have been unreasonable for a voluntary role. This role would have required specialist training which we had no capacity to provide.

Going forward, we have retained the Work IT programme as there is a daily need in branches for employment related help. The Work I.T. sessions are now bookable 1-2-1 appointments with the Digital Inclusion Officer. This new model of support is already proving popular. In November 2018 alone there were twenty-one 1-2-1 appointments. People are now given dedicated time slot and it seems people prefer the privacy that these sessions provide rather than a group setting. Sensitive information is often discussed such as benefit payments and illness therefore it is important that people feel comfortable and at ease in their learning environment. People prefer attending their local branch which is often close to home, therefore eliminating travel costs. Libraries are a trusted place within communities as people know that help will be given and if this is not possible that they will be signposted on to suitable services that can assist. Libraries are a welcoming space within communities. We have a range of resources that can benefit people – a warm friendly space, free Wi-Fi, free P.C. access, a range of books, audiobooks as well as free e-resources such as Theory Test Pro, e-magazines, eBooks and audiobooks which are all free to library members.

Whilst there are projects such as Fair Start and LEAP (Learning Employability And Progression) in the Stirling Council area, these schemes only accept people who meet set criteria with barriers to work whereas libraries can be more flexible. As well as helping and supporting long-term unemployed people we can also help people who are shorter-term unemployed, looking for a change in career or women who are returning to work. Organised programmes will not meet everyone's needs. Libraries are uniquely placed to offer help to people in a range of different circumstances. Going forward it is hoped that the Digital Inclusion Officer may be able to target specific groups who are currently digitally excluded. Discussions have been held regarding sessions specifically for women who are returning to work after an absence perhaps in collaboration with Tech Mums. There have been discussions with Stirling Council's Support and Integration team to hold sessions for refugees who have settled in the Stirling area. A successful session was held earlier in the year as part of refugee week activities. The Digital Services team worked with refugees, demonstrating our free e-resources, downloading apps, setting up online banking and accessing other local information online resources. This session went well and we look forward to collaborating in the future. The Digital Inclusion Officer has attended Refugee Training held by the Scottish Refugee Council. The Scottish Refugee Council are interested in the proposed sessions and are keen to maintain links and perhaps use Stirling Council Library Service as an example to other local authorities.

Partnership Working

One of the roles of the Digital Inclusion Officer was to identify, network and collaborate with partner organisations to increase uptake of Work IT sessions. The Digital Inclusion Officer worked closely with Connecting Stirling, Stirling Jobcentre Plus and Citizens Advice Bureau Stirling as well as other council services such as Learning and Employability, Advice Services and LEAP.

Connecting Stirling work with tenants of Forth Housing or Rural Stirling Housing Associations. Their Digital Inclusion Officers visit tenants in their own homes to teach digital skills. They often refer their clients to libraries for internet access and have informed those who are looking for work about the Work IT sessions.

The Digital Inclusion Officer attended Stirling Job Centre each week for a one month period. Bookable twenty minute slots were allocated by work coaches to clients who needed additional IT help with accessing Universal Credit and Universal Jobmatch accounts, creating and updating CVs, sending emails to potential employers and searching for job vacancies online. It was apparent that some people had never used their local library and had pre-conceived ideas of libraries of the past. Some people were therefore reluctant to ask their local branch for help. By meeting the Digital Inclusion Officer initially at the Job Centre, it was hoped that clients would be more confident in attending a Work IT session at their local branch when they had already met the session leader and were aware of what help could be offered. Unfortunately most of the individuals referred to these appointments had a one-off issue that they needed help with and once this was solved did not attend again. Only one learner from these appointments went on to regularly attend Work IT in a library. Additionally, there was often an issue with clients not attending their appointments. After discussion with the Digital Services Librarian it was decided that Job Centre appointments would cease and Work Coaches could refer clients to the Work IT sessions in libraries. This proved more successful. Work coaches were made aware of Work IT sessions and informed their clients of help available, particularly in rural areas.

Citizens Advice Bureau Stirling have two Job Clubs running in Cowie and Callander Libraries outwith opening hours. A Citizens Advice Advisor is available to offer

advice and information and attendees have access to PCs for job searches etc. The Digital Inclusion Officer initially attended the Cowie club to offer IT help, however many of the attendees were long-term unemployed or had health issues and were receiving PIP. Very few were interested in developing or enhancing their digital skills. It was decided that the Digital Inclusion Officer would no longer attend this Job Club but she commenced an additional session with the CAB advisor during library opening hours so that attendees could learn or get advice in a quieter environment.

In June 2018, the CAB were successful in gaining funding from Stirling Council for a Rural Access Advice Service and worked in collaboration Stirling Council's Digital Inclusion Officer to provide IT help and CAB advice in rural Stirling Council libraries, such as Balfron, Strathblane, Plean and Fallin. Digital inclusion was extended to rural areas where many people are often excluded from job seeking support and access to the internet or Wi-Fi. Many of these areas are often assumed to be wealthy therefore there is a lack of provision for unemployed residents. It was hoped the CAB could provide advice regarding benefits which as a library service we are unable to provide. The Digital Inclusion Officer could then alleviate some pressure on CAB advisers by providing IT support and demonstrating how to make claims online. Unfortunately whilst people seeking general CAB advice was high, there was little interest in benefits advice and in these particular groups there was little need for digital assistance.

Learning and Employability offers a range of classes across the Stirling Council area in a variety of subjects such as ICT, Arts and Crafts, Life Skills and Languages. If people were looking for more structured, longer-term class they were referred to the Learning and Employability team who could offer classes such as Computer Basics as well as a range of opportunities to support learning or enhance employability such as CV writing.

The LEAP Stirling project is part funded by the European Social Fund from 2014-2020. They offer a flexible and tailored programme to help local people progress towards work. However candidates must meet two from a set list of criteria to be eligible. In some circumstances where it was apparent that people had additional barriers to work or who were struggling with literacy or numeracy they were referred to LEAP for additional help and support.

Stirling Council's Advice Services could help people with money, debt and benefits advice. The Digital Inclusion Officer could refer attendees to this service if people needed advice on benefit entitlement including Universal credit, appealing against benefit decisions, applying for help from the Scottish Welfare Fund for a community care grant or crisis grant or food Bank referrals

While there are a number of services providing help in the Stirling area, many people are unaware of what support is available. Collaboration is needed between partners to ensure that people are receiving the help they need. Partnership work to date has been beneficial to all: a more joined-up method of working hopefully allows people a smoother transition through the services and eases some of the anxieties and stresses associated with claiming Universal Credit and other benefits.

Research

The impact of the IT help given to people seeking work in Stirling Council Libraries had never been officially measured. We sought to gauge whether such clubs and sessions were effective in building people's skills and confidence as they looked for employment. Learners were asked to complete a short anonymous questionnaire when they commenced the Work I.T. sessions. They were asked to rate their confidence in certain I.T. skills on a scale of one to five with one being not all confident and five being very confident. After attending the sessions for a period of time they were then asked to complete a feedback questionnaire in order to gauge if there had been any development in their confidence and skills.

Initial Findings

Attendees completed a questionnaire at the start of their second attendance at the Work I.T. session. The decision was made to complete a questionnaire at the second session as people were reluctant or declined if they were asked at the first session. There may be a number of reasons for this hesitancy; people often felt overwhelmed by the situation, were not yet comfortable or had a general mistrust. Many attendees were sceptical that the Work IT sessions were independent of the DWP and were concerned that information they shared in the sessions might be passed on. It could take a number of weeks for the Digital Inclusion Officer to build up a relationship with someone and for trust to be earned. In some circumstances, people, especially new Universal Claimants, were angry or upset at their situation therefore the Digital Inclusion Officer did not deem it suitable to ask them to fill out a questionnaire. In other circumstances an attendee may have been under the influence of drugs or alcohol and it was not deemed appropriate to ask someone to complete feedback when their ability to make decisions or judgements was impaired. By the second session the initial fear and feeling of trepidation had usually passed and people were feeling more optimistic about learning. Participants were asked to fill out the questionnaire and be as honest as possible. It was intended that after 4-6 sessions the participants would complete a feedback form assessing their

confidence to monitor any improvement. Some participants attended the sessions for a significantly longer period of time, sometimes up to 24 weeks. Therefore the average attendance was 11 weeks.

The initial results from 32 learners at the beginning of their attendance was as follows:

56% of attendees were male, and 44% were female (Appendix 1) with an average age of 53.5 years (Appendix 2). In some instances learners had gone through the education system at a time when computer use was not widespread, IT skills were in their infancy and they had received no formal digital education. Many people had careers that required little or no IT skills. If made unemployed some people found themselves with no IT skills to assist them with the Universal Credit system or to search for and apply for vacancies online.

41% of attendees had been looking for work for more than a year and 25% for less than six months (Appendix 3). Universal Credit is gradually replacing Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) as the main benefit to claim if claimants are unable to work because of sickness or disability. Therefore many of the participants needed help to manage their Universal Credit claim but were not actively seeking work. This will have an effect on the results concerning questions such as internet usage and how people's confidence and ability to seek employment has changed since coming to the club. In other words, this is not an easy area to examine in a brief questionnaire. It touches on sensitive and personal issues which are highly relevant to the individuals involved but which it is not appropriate for us to investigate.

Over 62% of learners came to the club because they had no internet access at home, 41% needed help using Universal Credit and over 34% need help creating a C.V. (Appendix 4).

44% of attendees were referred to the sessions from the Job Centre, 32% from word of mouth and 25% from their Local Library. No attendees stated that they found out about the club from publicity such as posters and online however some people may have selected 'From Library' as posters and leaflets are displayed in all branches. It is apparent we do need to consider the effectiveness of our promotional material and marketing. (Appendix 5).

44% said that they used the internet at least once a week, 28% said every day and 16% said never (Appendix 6).

41% of attendees had used the internet in the past month for job searching, 28 % for sending and receiving emails, 25% to use social media and 22% to search for information (Appendix 7).

When asked what people would like to become more confident in 22% answered searching for employment and related activities, 29% general I.T. skills, 19% using the internet, 13% wanted to be able to create and upload C.V.s and 13% wanted to be more proficient in sending emails. (Appendix 9)

When asked what their plans for the future were 64% of attendees stated employment, 14% were seeking volunteering opportunities, 7% wanted to learn

further and increase their literacy, numeracy and digital skills, 4% wanted to go on to higher education and 11% didn't answer (Appendix 10).

Follow Up Findings

Unfortunately of the 32 participants, 4 did not complete the follow up feedback questionnaire despite repeated attempts by the Digital Inclusion Officer to contact them. These four participants did attend the sessions for a minimum of four weeks and made considerable progress. One participant is known to have commenced Fair Start and another has returned to work after a significant period of illness. The other two participants have been untraceable therefore the figures presented may not be truly reflective. In addition, there were a number of infrequent or 'one off' attendees. These numbers were not recorded but in hindsight it would have been beneficial to understand exactly how many participants attended the sessions. These attendees usually already had fairly adequate IT skills but perhaps just needed some help to navigate their Universal Credit account or had a particular IT issue. Once this was addressed or solved they did not return. For example, the Digital Inclusion Officer attended Stirling Job Centre Plus for two hours per week for five weeks. During this period ten people were assisted by the Digital Inclusion Officer but only one person then went on to attend the Work IT sessions and participate in the research.

Every day usage of the internet was down to 18% from 28% but usage at least once a week was up to 68% from 44% (Appendix 12). Those using the internet less than once a week was at 14%, compared with 6% when commencing the sessions. Interestingly, during the follow up research no one said that they used the internet monthly or never in comparison to the start of the sessions when 6% said that they used the internet monthly and 16% said never. Therefore by gaining new digital skills people's internet usage as a whole had increased.

When asked what people were using the internet for in the past month (Appendix 13), 57% said they were using it to look for and apply for jobs compared to 41% initially. 54% answered that they send and receive emails, compared to 28% at the start of sessions. 54% also used the internet to search for information in comparison to 22% previously. The number of participants using internet banking was down as was those buying goods or services online but this may have been due to the missing feedback from the 4 absent participants. After attending the sessions, participants were using the internet for a wider variety of reasons.

When rating their confidence on a scale 1 to 5 (see Appendices 8 and 14), 1 being not at all confident and 5 being very confident, the average for sending as receiving emails was 3.18, up 0.96 from the beginning. Using a search engine was averaging 3.5, up 1.03, searching for employment online was 3.5, up 1.12, shopping online was 2.39, up 0.55, using public services online was 2.79, up 0.85 and controlling privacy settings was 2.43, up 0.59. The main tasks focussed on at Work I.T. sessions were the first three activities as they closely pertained to employment seeking activities. As the sessions were an hour long people were often only interested in these activities rather than online shopping and controlling privacy settings. Whilst the

increase in confidence may not be as dramatic as one would have liked, it is heartening to know that confidence was increased across all activities. These figures would have perhaps been higher if the four absent participants had provided their feedback.

It must be noted that there were some discrepancies in using the 1 to 5 scale to gauge confidence. One participant needed an email account set up on their first session. They had never used email before but when they completed their initial feedback form they rated themselves as a 4 in confidence in this task. However after attending the sessions for a few weeks and learning how to send and receive emails, add attachments etc. they scored their confidence at 3. In some cases it was apparent that people found the 1 to 5 scale difficult to judge. Some people marked themselves higher in confidence in the initial research and scored themselves lower after attending a number of sessions despite gaining digital skills that they previously did not possess. This may have been that people initially felt embarrassed by their lack of digital skills or perhaps underestimated the task ahead.

Of the 28 participants, 39% said that their confidence in using the internet had significantly improved and 61% said that their confidence had slightly improved. No one felt that their confidence hadn't changed (Appendix 15).

When asked how their confidence and ability to seek employment had changed since coming to the club 36% said that their confidence had significantly changed and 61% said it had slightly improved. 4% said that their confidence hadn't changed (Appendix 16).

Enhancing skills and increasing confidence can be a slow process. Many people who came to the sessions had very low self-esteem and were lacking confidence. Many people had found themselves in a situation that appeared hopeless and were struggling financially. It is heartening to see that there was some increase in confidence, no matter how small, in a relatively short period of time (see Appendix 17 for participants' comments). It was apparent that when filling out questionnaires and feedback that responses depended on how the person was feeling on the day. If someone was having a particularly difficult day it was noted that they often marked their confidence fairly low despite making significant progress. However, the increase in confidence, be it slight or significant, demonstrates that the help and support that libraries offer is indeed making a difference to people's lives. Any increase in confidence, no matter how small, is an achievement and hopefully gives people some optimism that they can achieve new things, and learn new skills. All of this can aid progress to employment.

Case Studies

One gentleman aged 63 had worked his whole life in construction until becoming unemployed last year. When he began attending the Work IT sessions he was unable to use a keyboard, mouse or gain access to the internet. After attending the sessions he has a library card and comes in to the library to use the computers outwith Work IT sessions. He has an email account, can confidently search for jobs and update his Universal Credit journal without any help. During the summer months he applied for a vacancy in construction and was successful. Unfortunately this was a temporary contract but it has boosted his confidence and he still attends his local library to carry out job searches and update his Universal Credit claim unassisted.

One lady, aged 61, stated that she had not been in a library since childhood. She had worked since she was fifteen but due to health issues had to give up her job. She admitted that she had limited literacy and numeracy skills. She attended the weekly Work IT sessions and also visited the library with her granddaughter who gave her additional help on the PCs. Afterwards, they chose books together which they had never done before. This lady is now no longer required to search for employment due to health reasons but she still visits her library for local information and knitting patterns. The library has become a part of her and her granddaughter's weekly routine.

One lady who is 52, worked in the caring profession for many years before having to give up work to look after a family member. After a number of years out of work she was looking for a new challenge but her confidence was low. When she first attended the Work I.T. sessions she created a C.V. which was a task that had caused her some considerable anxiety. She said that by attending the session she felt 'so much better' having had the support of someone who could show her how to go about this task. She is a busy lady with three grandchildren and said that she looked forward to the weekly Work IT session as she could have a coffee and get on with her job search in a relaxed and calm environment. She has now been referred to the Fair Start programme and is continuing to develop her skills to seek employment.

Tom, 61, attended Work IT for eight weeks. He already had basic IT skills before attending the sessions but wanted to learn more digital skills, particularly Microsoft Office, to help him apply for jobs. Tom was already a member of the library and he enjoyed attending the sessions in his local library as it is 'just round the corner' from his house. He stated that he is now more confident using computers but that his self-confidence and concentration has also significantly improved. He is now "[a] lot more confident doing job searches." Tom has applied for a number of jobs during the session and has been invited to an interview – the first in a number of years. He stated that attending the sessions "…makes learning easy and fun." There has been a significant increase not just in his digital skills but his personal confidence. Since commencing the sessions Tom now volunteers with a Citizens Advice job club helping others with basic IT and has applied to volunteer at their local office carrying out administrative duties. He is now applying for jobs in Administration and hopes he will be successful in gaining employment.

Conclusion

The need for help, guidance and support that is offered by IT sessions in Stirling Council Libraries has become increasingly apparent. A lack of digital skills is a barrier not only to claiming Universal Credit but also to entering employment and carrying out daily tasks such as paying bills, accessing public services and communicating. By becoming digitally engaged and gaining the skills needed to get online, people are able to communicate with others, learn new information and gain access to the wider world. The IT & Me and Work IT sessions are instrumental in ensuring people are digitally included but also combat social and economic isolation.

The attendance at IT & Me sessions has proved that there is a significant need for IT help amongst the general public. 62% of Work IT participants had no access to internet at home therefore libraries may be their only means of job searching, applying for jobs and managing Universal Credit claims. The digital sessions that Stirling Council offer enhance digital skills and increase the employability of all participants as well as empowering learners by encouraging internet use and providing access to additional opportunities and resources. Where people are retired and no longer interested in employment, they might consider volunteering opportunities or the possibility of further education, both of which would benefit their health and wellbeing and longer-term independent living. Libraries are therefore key in raising skills and growing confidence.

It is evident that more volunteers are needed to help cope with this demand and in the future it is hoped that we will have the capacity and resources to extend the help we offer through more in-depth learning and enhanced expertise.

The Digital Inclusion Officer will continue to work in partnership with Citizens Advice, Connecting Stirling and Jobcentre Plus. These collaborations have been beneficial to all; a more joined-up method of working allows people a smoother transition through the services and eases some of the anxieties and stresses that are associated with claiming Universal Credit and other benefits.

The Work IT sessions removed some of the confusion and isolation that people feel when seeking employment. By gaining digital skills at a steady pace people regained their own personal confidence but were also empowered by their new digital skills. It is hoped that the sessions will continue to allow learners to develop confidence, improve their wellbeing and encourage them to confidently enter employment.

It was evident that many people suffered from poor mental and physical health and some had alcohol and/ or substance abuse problems. It is apparent that this is an issue for some Universal Credit claimants and there are many people who are not receiving the help they need. Whilst libraries cannot deal with these issues, they will always be welcoming spaces that encourage people to learn and offer support where possible. By effectively collaborating with other partners we are now able to signpost people on to the appropriate agency who can help them.

The Work IT sessions have had a positive impact overall; they not only digitally included people but socially included them as well. People's overall confidence in IT skills and in seeking employment increased. This is a slow process for many people, particularly those who have been unemployed for a significant period of time, but this increase cannot be under-estimated. For many, a small improvement in skills and confidence can be a huge step forward towards employability.

List of Appendices

Initial Questionnaire

Feedback